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SUBJECT: BALANCING DEVELOPMENT WITH CONSERVATION AT YANAKARI GAME
RESERVE

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SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) Regional Environment Officer (REO) and ESTH Officer visited Yankari Game Reserve November 19-20 to assess wildlife and forest conservation efforts in the state. The game reserve, Nigeria's most well-known wildlife park and home to one of West Africa's largest remaining elephant populations, is facing the twin challenges of improving its infrastructure and wildlife conservation. Bauchi State, which took over control of the park from the Federal Government in 2006, is modernizing the park's infrastructure to attract tourists and generate revenue for the state's coffers. International NGOs are conducting training programs, with USG funding, to help beef up wildlife conservation in the park. END SUMMARY.

YANKARI: NIGERIA'S WILDLIFE TREASURE

¶2. (U) Yankari Game Reserve is Nigeria's oldest and best-known wildlife sanctuary. The park was first designated as a game reserve by the British in 1956 and its administration oscillated between the Federal and Bauchi State Governments multiple times since then. The State Government succeeded in wresting control over the park from the Federal Government in 2006. The state aims to develop and modernize the park to turn it into an attractive tourist destination.

¶3. (U) The vast park of more than 2,000 square kilometers consists of high-plateau savannah grasslands and scrub forests. It is located about 186 miles northeast of Abuja but because of the poor state of the road leading to the park and heavy traffic, it takes about seven hours to get there. (NOTE: The last 50 miles of the road has been recently paved and is in pristine condition. END NOTE). The park is blessed with a diverse array of wildlife, including elephants, lions, hippos, crocodiles, warthogs, buffalos, baboons, various species of monkeys, hornbills, kingfishers, and bushbuck and waterbuck antelopes. The park, with an estimated 348 elephants, is home to one of the largest remaining elephant populations in West Africa, according to the most recent survey conducted in 2006. The park boasts two additional draws for the potential tourist: natural hot spring pools and man-made caves, which archaeologists believe were dug into sandstone cliffs as hiding places during the slave-trade era.

INFRASTRUCTURE VASTLY IMPROVED UNDER STATE CONTROL

14. (SBU) The Bauchi State Government, since assuming jurisdiction over the park in 2006, has sunk millions of dollars into modernizing the park's infrastructure, which fell into disrepair during the most recent period of federal management from 1991 to 2006. The Nigerian National Park Service, according to Yankari's Game Reserve management, did succeed in bringing electricity to the reserve during its last tenure, despite the general deterioration in infrastructure during that period.

15. (SBU) The Bauchi State Government is constructing new guest chalets and a conference center. It has also paved the main access road to the game reserve. The State Government is hoping that all of the game reserve's renovations and upgrades will be completed by the end of 2010. State officials expect to attract a steady stream of tourists and raise entrance fees and lodging rates to generate enough revenue to help repay the loans that the state incurred to upgrade the complex. The state intends to transfer management of the game reserve to a private international game reserve management company, once renovations and upgrades are completed, according to the Permanent Secretary to the Bauchi State Government.

BEEFING UP WILDLIFE CONSERVATION

16. (SBU) Both the current game reserve manager and the Permanent Secretary to the Bauchi State Government conceded that the park rangers were better trained in wildlife conservation, protection and enforcement when the game reserve park was under federal management. They said several experienced park rangers left when the state took over in 2006 because state salaries and benefits for rangers are

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lower than those paid by the federal government. The state has hired one of Nigeria's most experienced wildlife conservationists, a 30-year veteran of the National Park Service, to manage the game reserve. But there is no middle management between the manager and the ranger staff.

17. (U) The Bauchi State Government Permanent Secretary expressed his appreciation for the training and support that international NGOs -- with USG funding -- have been providing to park personnel since the state assumed jurisdiction over the game reserve in 2006. The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) has received financial support from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's African Elephant Conservation Fund over the past few years to carry out conservation and enforcement training in Yankari. Experts from the North Carolina State Zoo, with support from the same fund, have provided Yankari with "cyber-trackers" and trained rangers on their use. (NOTE: Cyber trackers are handheld digital devices equipped with specially designed wildlife management software and GPS navigation. The devices allow rangers to record key data on their patrols, including wildlife sightings and enforcement activities. The data is automatically sent to a central database maintained by WCS and can be downloaded to a database at park headquarters. END NOTE). Panthera, an international NGO dedicated to the conservation of wildcats, also conducted a survey on the park's lion population and provided guidance and training to rangers. (NOTE: Panthera estimates that there are 20-70 lions living in the park and their long-term viability is in question without enhanced conservation efforts. END NOTE).

18. (SBU) The game reserve is not enclosed with physical barriers, exposing the wildlife to significant threats from poachers and local communities that surround the park. At least five elephants were killed by poachers in the last 18 months, according to the reserve's manager. The game reserve employs a ranger staff of 150, including 20 "reformed" poachers, with good knowledge of the reserve's animal population and topography. However, the rangers lack adequate equipment for monitoring and preventing poaching. The you also need training in guiding skills for tourists. The game reserve also needs to upgrad its roads and bridges that make up the main safari routes for tourists.

¶9. (SBU) Local cattle owners graze their cattle in the reserve and there is constant encroachment by farmers into the reserved area. Reserve officials said there are sometimes conflicts between elephants and farmers, when elephants stray outside the reserve into adjacent farmland. Earlier conservation projects, funded by the Global Environment Facility, worked with local communities around the park to help lessen conflict between the park and cattle grazers and farmers.

COMMENT

¶10. (SBU) The Bauchi State Government has gotten off to a good start in upgrading and modernizing Yankari's infrastructure for attracting tourists. Yankari has great potential, especially if it focuses on attracting Nigerian tourists. However, its remoteness, pricey lodging fees, the poor state of Nigeria's roads, and the lack of a public transportation system will be major impediments to most tourists. Continued USG and international NGO engagement could help improve wildlife conservation, protection and enforcement practices. ¶improve wildlife conservation, protection and enforcement practices at Yamkari Game Reserve.

¶11. Embassy Abuja coordinated this cable with ConGen Lagos.

SANDERS